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## Viewing cable 09BAKU132, HOW IRAN BUILDS INFLUENCE

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### Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

### Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#09BAKU132**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
<a href="#">09BAKU132</a>	<a href="#">2009-02-18 11:10</a>	<a href="#">2011-08-30 01:44</a>	<a href="#">SECRET</a>	<a href="#">Embassy Baku</a>

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2011/04/17/112290/state-department-cables-reveal.html>

VZCZCXRO5334  
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK  
DE RUEHKB #0132/01 0491110  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
P 181110Z FEB 09  
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0781  
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 000132

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/17/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [ECON](#) [EAID](#) [AJ](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)  
SUBJECT: HOW IRAN BUILDS INFLUENCE

REF: A) 2008 BAKU 1018 B) 2008 BAKU 1069 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: POLECON COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK, REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

## Summary

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¶1. (S) Iranian outreach activities in Azerbaijan rest on a tripod of "social engagement" organizations, including an "Iran Assistance Society"; the Baku-based Iranian Culture House and its affiliates; and the Iranian Red Crescent society, based in "Iranian Clinics" in Baku and elsewhere. Important satellite institutions, such as charitable foundations administered by Iranians with Revolutionary Guard ties and Iranian-funded mosques (one led by a son-in-law of Ayatollah Meshkini), exist as de facto sub-sets under these three categories.

¶2. (S) While geographic proximity and overlapping culture, language, and religion make Azerbaijan a particularly accessible target for Iranian penetration and influence building, the structure outlined above suggests a model for methodologies of Iranian penetration in other Islamic countries. Although the long-range implications and even goals of this Iranian effort are unclear the immediate goal appears to be the weaning away of the Azerbaijani population from a "Western" to a more explicitly Islamic and pro-Iranian political and cultural orientation. While GOAJ policy change may be an ultimate desired result, regime change does not appear to be the short-term objective of these activities. End Summary.

## Iran's "Outreach" Goals

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¶3. (S) Note: This cable is the first in a series of reports delving into Iranian influence-building activities in Azerbaijan; positioning and activities in Azerbaijan and the region of Revolutionary Guard or other regime-connected companies and individuals; related illicit trading activities; and similar issues. End Note.

¶4. (S) The following information is based on discussions with Iranian business figures, students, and academics based in Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijanis from several levels of society. All sources claimed direct knowledge of at least some aspects of these Iranian activities. In terms of broad outreach, the main thrust of Iranian influence-building here appears to be directed primarily towards influence and network-building within the general population in an effort to bring Azerbaijan's society and people into a non-Western, "Islamic" cultural and political orbit sympathetic to Iran. This, rather than fomenting short-term regime change, may be Iran's immediate priority. While Azerbaijan is perhaps unique among regional countries in sharing with Iran a large degree of cultural, historic, religious, and linguistic similarities, with minor revisions the practices discussed below may serve as a model for Iranian influence-building practices in the larger Middle East, and indeed the entire Islamic world.

## Iran's "Three-Pronged" Methodology

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¶5. (S) Iran's influence-building and network-building efforts in Azerbaijan are low-profile, but substantial. Exempting the various diplomatic and quasi-diplomatic activities of Iran's large Embassy (regarded by several Azerbaijani interlocutors as increasingly ineffective compared to earlier years), Iran's influence-building effort inside Azerbaijan is largely three-pronged:

-- distribution of financial assistance and micro-loans to Azerbaijanis via an "Iran Assistance Society," with offices in provincial towns; other Iranian foundations also disburse stipends or grants.

-- extra-cultural proselytizing, scholarship-granting, pilgrimage-funding, and general networking activity centered on the Iranian "House of Culture" in Baku, and loosely related mosques and clerics; and

-- medical assistance and intelligence personnel positioning by the Iranian Red Crescent and an associated "Iran Clinic" in Baku.

The information provided below focuses on Iran's micro-loans and other financial assistance activities ("prong #1"). Information on the other two "prongs" will be provided in Part II of this cable (septel).

#### Iranian Micro-Loans and Financial Grants

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¶6. (S) In the last several months many elite Azerbaijani's have expressed concern to Iran watcher and other Baku EmbOffs about allegedly spreading pro-Iranian Islamicization in Baku and the provinces, partially fostered by Iranian financial grants and other "outreach" activities (see reftels). While emphasizing this issue rhetorically, these sources typically have provided little beyond assertions to back up these concerns. In the last few weeks Iran watcher has finally received information from a number of "grass roots" sources that provide some concrete information on what is occurring in practice in Baku and at least some provincial centers (though comprehensive information on Azerbaijan as a whole remains to be assembled).

#### Iranian Loans in Practice: Generous Terms...

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¶7. (S) An Azerbaijani XXXXXXXXXXXX from a leading family in the (majority-Sh'ia) village of Lahej in North Central Azerbaijan, and his father, both of whom have been known well by Iran watcher for more than seven years. These sources provided Iran watcher with details about several hundred thousand dollars in micro-loans and grants given recently by Iranians to Lahej residents. They described these as loans and charitable grants given by a regional body known as the 'Iran Assistance Society (Iran Yardim Jamiati)," operating out of an office in the provincial capital of Ismaili (where the source's family also maintains a house). They claimed that over the last few months this organization has caused a stir in Lahej and the greater region by providing small shopkeepers, craftsmen, and other residents (including several of their relatives) with "business development" loans of up to 4,000 Manats (about \$4300).

¶8. (S) They described these as no-interest loans, with phased repayment delayed until two years after the date of the loan. Noting that neither the GOAJ nor any other organization offers such assistance loans to broad numbers of local people, they asserted (somewhat cynically) that as a result of its generous micro-credits and charitable grants "Iran is becoming very popular in Lahej now." The sources said that loan applicants are not asked explicitly about their politics or religious activities, but claimed that prominent local religious conservatives and Hajjis (including the father's half-uncle) are frequently consulted about applicants from their area before loan decisions are made. They also opined that some of these conservatives have access to larger funds from the Iranians, citing improved houses, new cars, and other "circumstantial evidence." Comment: We have heard widespread assertions that conservative Islamic networking "pays" in the provinces, with Sh'ia close to Iran gaining income as a result, while conservative Sunnis obtain benefits from Turkish or Saudi sources. As articulated, the attitude echoes the Soviet-era belief that becoming a "professional communist" could be a lucrative career path. End Comment.

¶9. (S) The father added that the loan officers commonly ask applicants informally about conditions in their area, who the leading/most respected people are, whether they have made any pilgrimages, and similar questions, but did not give specific examples. The student reported that he had been advised by his great-uncle to approach the Iranians for funding for a notional pilgrimage to a famous Iranian religious shrine in Mashad. Comment: Much of this information coincides with claims provided separately to Iran watcher by Iranian students and other residents in Baku unknown to this source (see paras #11 - #13 below). End Comment.

...But No "Easy Touch"

¶10. (S) Implying that grants are not given to all conservative comers, the XXXXXXXXXXXX related that a religiously conservative relative recently put a hejab (head covering) on his elderly sister, and submitted a request from her for a charitable grant. The student said that grant was denied because the woman has four adult sons. He added that many women who apply for assistance put on hejabs specifically for the purpose of their application (Note: hejabs are not traditionally worn in Lahej, though social practices are conservative in other respects. End Note).

#### Other Sources on Iranian Social Loans

¶11. (S) An Iranian student activist, a well-connected Iranian business figure, a former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran (Nasib Nassibili), and a former Iranian political journalist, separately commented on alleged Iranian regime affiliated activity in Azerbaijan. According to these sources, the "Komiteh Imam Khomeini" (specified by the student) and other major Iranian foundations help poor families in Iran, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and elsewhere, with the help of on-budget government grants as well as profits from commercial and real estate assets. All asserted that (apart from being notionally subject to audits) these organizations have little constraint on their activities, and frequently works closely with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and other Iranian security services.

¶12. (S) All sources claimed that these organizations typically give no-interest credit to low-income Azerbaijanis, including Azerbaijani refugees resulting from the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict with Armenia, and other types of financial or in-kind assistance. Two sources cited in passing the large Iranian Foundation of the Oppressed ("Baniyadeh Mustazafan") that owns a soap detergent factory in Baku (and many enterprises in Iran), and provides stipends to eligible Iranian residents in Azerbaijan and other disbursements. The sources claimed that the head of this Foundation in Azerbaijan is a retired senior officer in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard (septel).

¶13. (S) Gathering information on local issues, elites and religious figures was mentioned by virtually all sources as an important activity of these organizations. Sources claimed that the organizations also seek to develop relationships with religiously conservative figures by offering them assistance and/or influence in granting assistance to others; scholarships for their children in Iran (or in Baku at the large Iranian-funded private school); funds for pilgrimages; employment or business opportunities with Iranians or Azerbaijani Iranophiles; etc.

¶14. (S) Several sources explicitly depicted the organizations as clearing houses for identifying individuals amenable to training in Iran, who might become a future "vanguard" Iran-sympathetic/anti-Western political or religious cadres. Valeh Aleskarov, Deputy Speaker of the Azerbaijan Majlis, and a figure well known to the USG, observed to Iran watcher that "it doesn't take many committed people to become an effective vanguard," and asserted that if even ten percent of those assisted by Iran became politicized Iranophiles "this will be dangerous for us" as a politically secular country.

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